

Perceptions of Successful Graduates of Juvenile Residential Programs:

A Phenomenological Study

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Purpose/Perspectives

Juvenile delinquency and recidivism in America are major issues being debated by federal, state, and local governments. Criminologists and lawmakers consider what can be done to impart intervention and prevention measures. They seem to agree that crime prevention through education is a viable means for diminishing juvenile delinquency. Providing youth with a combination of academic and counseling services appears to be at the forefront of this approach. While varying philosophical perspectives and limited data continue to fuel the recidivism debate, the overarching question remains, “How do we reduce juvenile recidivism?”

Communities are becoming gradually more aware of this growing epidemic and its impact on communities and family lives. This issue requires the attention of both policy makers and citizens given the deleterious impact of such practices on youth and their communities, notwithstanding their shared or mutually exclusive viewpoints.

The original perspective of the juvenile justice system was centered from a rehabilitative stance. Social-welfare appeared to be the overarching paradigm as court systems throughout the United States stressed individualized treatment as a healing balm for combating delinquency. In response to what appeared to be a growing epidemic of juvenile crime and delinquency, a philosophical change was necessary. By the 1960s, the U.S. court system regarded the social-welfare approach ineffective (Ferrall, 2002) and began instituting myriad approaches to address the problem.

Accountability became the central mechanism for handling this situation. Modern reformers countered the assertion that juvenile offenders were too immature to understand the rationales for their delinquent acts. Consequently, these modern reformers embraced the notion of accountability and community protection as their philosophical correlates (Reppucci, 1999; Ferrall, 2002; Granello & Hanna, 2003). These modern reformers were part of the restorative justice movement (Ferrall, 2002). The conceptual framework for this movement indicated juveniles would be made accountable for committing delinquent acts. The change in philosophy focused on punishing the juveniles for their delinquent behaviors. This restorative-judicial process included a criminal trial and proceedings that were similar to the adult court system. These juvenile courts resembled scaled down versions of adult criminal courts as opposed to a blend of justice and social service (Crawford, 2001).

The Control Theory and the Differential Association Theory provided theoretical perspectives on juvenile delinquency and recidivism. Both theories established rationales for why young people engaged in deviant behaviors. In 1969, Hirschi derived his “control theory” by exploring the various methods on how young people bond to society. Sutherland and Cressey (1970) based their Differential Association Theory on the foundations by which young people respond to their environments. The Differential Association Theory has the following tenets:

- 1) All behavior is learned.
- 2) Delinquent behavior is learned in small groups.
- 3) Delinquent behavior is learned from collective and specific situational events.

Finding ways to reduce recidivism continues to be one of the most challenging issues in the area of crime prevention. A review of the literature specifies that the major issues

surrounding delinquency and recidivism are family, community, and education. Research suggests that in order to find solutions to this phenomenon, a comprehensive understanding of the aforementioned theories need to be understood (e.g., their effect on society as a whole). Key stakeholders are encouraged to consider the “lived experiences” of those individuals who have experienced this phenomenon.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify the “essence” (Creswell, 2003) of deep philosophical issues pertaining to the lived experiences of successful graduates of juvenile treatment programs and to attempt to understand why juveniles succeed or fail as they engage in treatments.

#### Methods/Data Sources

Data were collected from 9 young adult participants (See Appendix A) between the ages of 18 to 23 who had satisfied their court-ordered sanctions in different residential facilities and who had successfully completed their aftercare supervisions. Participants had been adjudicated as delinquents by the courts and committed to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. These young adults had previously served in a level four (low-risk), level six (moderate-risk), level eight (high-risk), or level ten (maximum-risk) treatment program and were receiving post-secondary instruction in a college/vocational school or were gainfully employed.

The interview protocol emerged from the review of the literature (Appendix B). Interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes assessed the risk factors that contributed to recidivism. Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions regarding equity and questions about their overall evaluations of the residential program in terms of effectiveness at rehabilitation.

The researchers coded the transcriptions of interviews to discover themes, patterns, or clusters of meanings and used N6 software to organize texts, data files, and to enhance interpretation.

### Findings

#### Dominant Themes: Overcoming Patterns of Delinquent Behaviors

Many young offenders experienced difficulty in this area. Recidivism has become a major issue within the juvenile justice system. Patterns of delinquent behaviors have been the causes of higher juvenile crime rates and more juveniles being direct-filed into the adult system. After these young offenders successfully completed their treatment programs, they were sent back to their natural environments. They were faced with the same circumstances they had experienced before they began treatment (e.g., dilapidated living conditions, drugs, violence, and lack of financial capital). Therefore, overcoming patterns of negative behavior was described by all of the participants as challenging.

#### *Programmatic Impact*

Five of the participants described how their programs impacted them in multifaceted ways. One participant (“John”) expressed that his outpatient program provided him with tutorial services that helped him receive a general equivalency diploma. The counseling services assisted “John” in forming more positive choices as well. This program provided information on grant funding that could be used to fund business opportunities instead of selling drugs to fund his life. “John” replied, “This was a major eye-opener for me because it provided me with an opportunity to make money in a positive way rather than standing on the corner selling drugs.”

“Jim” shared that his program scheduled groups that were practical. “They involved

arts and crafts: you drew what you saw yourself doing in the future and what you were going to do to get there.” They broke things down into meaningful parts. “Sincere” stated that his program contributed to an inner desire he had to succeed by showing him alternative methods to make money so that he would not continue towards the same delinquent path.

“Mike” indicated that a person’s success or failure after treatment depended upon the way he was treated by programs’ staffs. In his particular case, he became worse while in one level six program because the staff used less compassion and criticized him frequently. He did not overcome his patterns of delinquent behaviors until he was placed in a more structured level eight program where counselors realized and addressed his special needs.

#### *Inner Desire for Positive Life Outcomes*

Four of the participants expressed innate desires to achieve their life-long goals by creating futures for themselves. Two of the participants specifically noted “enjoying freedom” as their rationale for achievement. One participant expressed that there is no limit to achieving. “Jeff” stated, “Now I actually think about the outcome of my actions, and risking my freedom to do something really stupid and go away for a very long time is not worth it.” “Mike” explained that his entire family has been involved with the justice system: from uncles to cousins, and he was informed by a circuit court judge that he would have to serve 15 years for any additional charge:

I have a baby on the way. I don’t want to be the father to my child that my father was to me. I don’t want to do that to my son. I look at my past; my father tried to kill me because of my color. I love myself to the fullest. I am tired of messing up; if I keep messing myself up, that means I don’t love myself.

“Sincere” held that there are no limits to achieving:

I have an inner will to succeed. A lot of times, people limit themselves; their dreams are small. I tell a lot of people in my neighborhood that people think as far as their hands can reach. They feel that if they can't grab or touch it, then they think they are incapable of reaching or achieving it.

*"Happy"* explained that he created a future for himself:

If I didn't do this, I would continue to do the same things I did before I was detained. So I created a future and chose different friends; because the person that leads you into the wrong temptations is not your friend. I learned to choose friends who were about respect and doing the right thing and about living life righteously.

#### *Direct-File as Shock Treatments*

In a variety of circumstances, the state attorney decides that juveniles should be tried as adults. When this happens, a petition for "direct-file" is forwarded to the circuit court judge. Habitual juvenile offenders who are near majority may be direct-filed if they have allegedly committed serious offenses against persons. For some, being direct-filed means that they will incur adult criminal records. However, in the case of several of these participants, being direct-filed into the adult system was considered shock treatment. These offenders were placed in adult jails for certain times and given juvenile sanctions. They were fortunate that their judges provided them with alternative juvenile sanctions; the judges were concerned with making these youth accountable in addition to rehabilitating them.

*"Bob"* stated that learning did not take place until he was direct-filed into the adult system:

It woke me up a little. I quit doing robberies and serious crimes. I sat in jail for months before I was placed in a program. I had no choice but to change. For most of

my years as a juvenile, I really did not get caught for doing all of the crimes I did. I just got a slap on the wrist. Many times detectives would question me on crimes they knew I did. I would get arrested, and they would call my mom (whom I was not living with) and make her come pick me up. After they let me out, she would get into another car and go her separate way, and I would go my way. I really never learned as a juvenile until I was placed in jail with adults. The police facilitated further corruption by not taking a tough stand on me early on. But, as a young adult, I learned really that I did not get away with the crimes I did.

The interviewer asked, “*Tom*” the following question, “How were you able to overcome the repeating pattern of further delinquency?” His response was, “I really didn’t, and the Broward County Sheriff’s Office did.”

They stopped it for me when I was about to turn 18. I got arrested for strong-armed robbery, trafficking amphetamines, vicadin, possession of codine, possession of ritalin, and grand theft auto all at once. They placed me in the juvenile detention center for a couple of weeks; once the state attorney viewed my case, they direct-filed me to the adult system. They told me that if I could commit an adult crime, then I could be tried as an adult.

The interviewer rephrased the aforementioned question by asking the participant to reflect back on his delinquent past as a juvenile and state how would was he able to overcome the repeating patterns of further delinquency without the Sheriff Office’s support, and the participant said emphatically:

I would not have reached out for help myself, and it took someone else to step in because I sure was not going to stop myself. My past has made me who I am today. I



am in a better position because of that experience. I did months in the Broward County jail before being allowed to go to a juvenile residential program.

“*Sincere*” felt that he was given a break because the judge allowed him to fulfill his sanctions in a program instead of having to serve his time in an adult prison system. He successfully completed a level 10 (maximum-risk) residential program.

### *Supportive Familial Relationships*

Literature has shown that strong family bonds positively impact young offenders with overcoming patterns of delinquency. Young offenders who had supportive families while in treatment were less likely to re-offend. “*Happy*” was fortunate enough to meet about a year ago some of his extended family members from his biological father’s side of the family:

A particular uncle of mine who is very educated and goal-oriented provided me with a lot of direction about life and offered to remain in my life as a father figure and mentor. I believe that God sent him in my life for a reason: to show me that there is still a chance; there is still time to make it. Meeting with my extended family and sitting down and talking about my goals and possibilities took me away from the streets and allowed me to focus my mind on my future. I realized also that I have to set an example for my younger sisters. If I continue the life from the past, then I feel that I would be tempting my sisters to do what I did.

“*Sincere*” stated that his family was very supportive in helping him overcome a desire to commit further delinquent acts:

I stopped thinking about myself and began focusing on my mother. I realized that my mother had a tougher life than me; therefore, I decided to change for her. My mother was extremely supportive and did not judge me.

### Challenge of Remaining Focused and Goal-Oriented

Research has shown that a portion of juvenile offenders who served time in juvenile treatment programs have had some difficulties remaining focused and achievement-oriented after returning to their natural environments. These challenges arise because former offenders face the ultimate responsibilities of relinquishing obsolete thought-forms and patterns that have caused them to initially get into trouble.

### *Reflection on Past Transgressions*

Two of the participants examined their pasts internally and understood that their past transgressions were situations that allowed them growth and renewal.

“*John*” summarized his perspective on this issue:

When you venture back into your community and begin engaging in positive things, people tend to notice and provide positive feedback as encouragement. It makes you appreciate the things you learned. I remain focused by reflecting on the negative things I did, knowing that I do not want to go back to the same old do-the-crime-lock-me-up routine. Also, because I am working, the police in my community now respects me because they know I am not out there doing crimes. They see me as a law-abiding citizen and that makes me want more of it (RESPECT) for doing what is right. The police recognize and respect me because they know that I am one less person that they have to arrest.

“*Bob*” reflected on several situations that helped him remain focused:

My key to being focused is to look at how I lived my life in the past; I had nice cars, gold, and clothes. These things came and left real fast. I looked at people I hurt including my family and myself. I reflect on my past mistakes and really see that

there were people who cared for me and I hurt them. I don't want to return to these negative and old ways.

### *Proactive Stance*

Participants became active in shaping their destinies. Three of the participants expressed that they were proactively engaged in positive learning activities or fulfilling important life-long missions. “*Sam*” indicated that searching for employment for the summer takes up most of his time; applying for jobs keeps him from being in the streets engaged in delinquent behaviors. “*Jeff*” preoccupies himself with positive learning objectives. He is in recovery and attends numerous meetings (i.e., two meetings per day). Jeff no longer associates with friends from his past and reported the enjoyment of friends who are in recovery. “I go to conventions; it is amazing how many people are in one room and the friends you can meet at one of those conventions.” Jeff explained further that he attended outpatient and aftercare services at the “House of Hope.” This program provides him with alternative means for a better life. “It makes you want to achieve more.”

“*Mike*” stated that his skills as an athlete, an artist, and a poet helped him remain focused and goal-oriented. In addition, Mike expressed that he remains focused because of his vision and mission of getting out of the ghetto. “And I also have will-power (the key to life and success).” “*Sincere*” established the goal of fulfilling his mother’s dream as a rationale for his persistence:

I remember when I first got out of the program; my mom stated that all she wanted was to own her own house. We have been renting for 18 years. What keeps me focused is setting my eyes on buying my mom the house of her dreams.

### *Philosophical Perspectives*

Two of the participants provided philosophical perspectives when asked to comment on their abilities to remain focused and goal-oriented given their past juvenile records.

“*Tom*” cited consequences and rewards as his overarching principles:

I try to look at it two different ways: consequences and rewards. There are positive consequences and there are negative consequences. I can’t only look at the negative because I would be waiting for something to fall out of the sky and crash on me. And if I only look at the positive, then I am only going to remain complacent and stay where I am. So, I got to remember what I have to gain and what I have to lose; this keeps me focused.

Being able to see the positives and negatives in his life and not relying so heavily on one particular area allows him to sustain balance in his life.

“*Sincere*” commented that although he had to complete a level 10 program (i.e., prison for juveniles), he was aware that the situation could have been worse; he has witnessed people in worse predicaments who have maintained success in their endeavors. He envisions them as examples-which keep him focused and goal-oriented.

#### Suggestions for Young Offenders

Many young offenders return to mainstream society with good intentions. A vast majority of these individuals establish criteria on the methods by which they are going to navigate the cesspools of negativity that exist within their natural environments. Successful graduates of residential programs suggested the following criteria: relinquish the tough image, refrain from negative peer influences, and apply learned objectives.

#### *Relinquish Tough Image*

Young people from a variety of urban (and some suburban) communities model a

tough image around peers to reflect a sense of self-importance or to represent a pseudo-tough appearance. These young people could use some constructive feedback from individuals who have experienced this phenomenon. Participants were asked the following question: *Given your experiences in a residential program, what experiences can you share that could assist young offenders in making a positive transition from a residential program to mainstream society?* Two of the participants encouraged these young offenders to get rid of certain negative patterns and listen to authority figures who have their best interests at hand. “Bob” stated that he would use tough love to reach these young people:

I would first try to grab their attention by talking their language (which may involve cursing and saying things that they may not want to hear just to get their attention). I would tell them to lose the ‘thug shit,’ lose the ‘attitude,’ and listen. Next, I would share some of my personal experiences in and out of the system in hopes that my delinquent past would help them make better choices. I would try to let them see some or feel some of the pain I experienced by doing ‘stupid shit.’

“Tom” encouraged young offenders not to fight against the system. Tom’s passionate words were expressed as follows:

Take the help; you can’t do it on your own; I tried and a lot of times my way wasn’t working; therefore, I tried a different way and it works. You are only fighting yourself if you try to outsmart the system. It is not going to work. Be opened minded; put down that brick wall: there are a lot of good things on the other side of it.

#### *Refrain from Negative Peer Influences*

“Peer influence is the main thing that gets you back in trouble,” according to “John.” The goal is for young offenders to establish themselves around positive individuals who

desire successful outcomes. “*John’s*” exact words are as follows:

Successful young people won’t listen to negative talk but will on focus on what they can do to make themselves better when they return. These are the ones that stay out of the system. Focusing on educational goals and not being a follower would steer them in a more favorable position when they return.

“*John*” indicated further that he is faced with many negative environmental influences: he had friends who would steal and engaged in a variety of negative situations. He stated, “Your friends may not want to change, and it is up to you as the strong person not to allow peer pressure to negatively persuade you.”

“*Mike*” suggested once young offenders return to mainstream society, they need to meet new friends to broaden their perspectives on things. These young people changed while in treatment, so did their former friends; therefore, he advised them to select a new group of people who resonate with their “change-in-perspective.” “*Sam*” shared the fact that he associates with a group of new friends who have never been in the juvenile justice system, who are about doing the right thing. He learned early that negative peer associations exist when you follow the wrong crowd. He reported further that he remains far from where trouble looms such as parties “because you don’t always have to commit the crime; it is who you are with that can scar you.”

#### *Apply Learned Objectives*

All of the juvenile residential programs teach young people a variety of skills that may assist them in making successful transitions back in their home environments. It is the responsibility of the young offenders to apply what they learned so that they can have more successes in life. “*Jeff*” advised young offenders to listen to the therapists and counselors

and learn from them because they have advice that could assist them once they return home.

“*Jeff*” stressed the importance of acquiring new coping skills, learning anger control methods, and using what you learned when the situation warrants.

“*Mike*” offered a list of important details for young people who seek more productive transition experiences:

As you get out, don’t forget everything that you were taught from the program. When you get out into society, don’t just rush into things: set goals, make plans, and think about your future. You always have to be one foot ahead of the game. If you have been locked up for a long time, make certain that you get the proper identification straight. You have to get your priorities straight and secure a job to better yourself.

“*Happy*” expressed goal setting as a key factor for success:

The first thing they need to do is set some goals. Establish things that are gonna get them on the right track. School should be the first thing that comes to mind. If they are old enough, then they can get a job. If they don’t set any goals, then they are gonna fall back into the trap of trouble. They just need to find positive things that will occupy their time.

“*Sincere*” shared how he made his transition:

Before I left the program, I wrote down all of my long-term goals. A guy once told me that if you don’t write it down, you would never do it. From that point on, I write down everything; this helps me remain focused. Young offenders who are returning to mainstream must remember what they were taught in the program and be able to apply it back when they get around their family and friends. This may prevent any manipulation by people in the streets (you have to remember that these young people

were removed from their homes for a period of time, so the game changes back home when they are locked up). If they don't stay focused on positive things, then they won't make it.

### Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study provide an in-depth portrait of the perceptions and experiences of successful graduates of juvenile residential programs. Participants' experiences centered on several themes that closely mirrored foundations of the theoretical framework: varying perspectives within juvenile residential programs, overcoming patterns of delinquent behavior, remaining focused and goal-oriented, successful transition experiences, and rationales for success and failure after treatment. The two research questions are discussed within the themes.

Question One: How do former juvenile recidivists describe their past experiences in residential programs?

All of the participants expressed that their experiences in residential treatment programs were diverse. They understood that by serving time in these programs, they were fulfilling their court-ordered sanctions and adhering to the mission of the juvenile justice system: community protection, youth accountability, and competency development. The juveniles satisfied two of the three issues just by entering their programs. The major issue was competency development (i.e., rehabilitation).

Research has shown that rehabilitation plays an important role in reducing juvenile recidivism. More than half of the participants reported positive aspects on how their programs impacted them in multifaceted ways. They emphasized educational and counseling services as major contributors to their competency development. Teachers used non-



traditional approaches in their lessons to command the interest of their students. Hands-on (practical) exercises captured the attention of their students as teachers facilitated the process of their educational experiences. This approach is aligned with Vygotsky (1978), who envisioned learners as active participants in co-constructing and making practical sense out of what they already know rather than memorizing facts they can mimic.

Counselors impacted these young offenders in a variety of ways. The effective counselors were competent, compassionate, sensitive, and trustworthy. They assisted these young offenders by diagnosing them and addressing their special needs. This approach is similar to Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) instituted by Wertz (2004). Therapists/counselors composed individual treatment plans for their clients who exhibit dysfunctional behaviors. They also addressed familial, school, peer, and community related sources that may impact the juveniles when they returned to their home environments. Selm (2001) expressed further that community-based transition programs allowed young offenders to restore their self-respect and senses of responsibility. They were better prepared to deal with the demands of the real world after treatment and served their communities in constructive ways rather than hindered them.

Several of the participants citing verbal, mental, and even physical abuse reported experiencing difficult associations with counselors and program staff. Within bureaucratic organizations (e.g., The Juvenile Justice System), there are driving and restraining forces that push and pull the organization in various directions. Lewin (1947) called this force field analysis. Lack of cohesiveness of program staff with clients was a major restraint to rehabilitation. This may lead to further deviancy on behalf of the juveniles who may have made legitimate attempts to conform. Agnew's (2001) strain theory articulated that when

adolescents are confronted by desires that are not fulfilled, a pressure develops and consequently in desperation they turn to deviant behavior. Adolescents are pressured into delinquency by negative affective states, most notably anger-related emotions. This embellishes the principle of low social control.

In an effort to help former offenders overcome difficult program experiences, they cited supportive family relationships as key factors. “Attachment” (to parents) was presented as an important element in Hirschi’s (2002) social control theory. Literature has shown that people who had strong family bonds were less likely to re-offend. Their families nurtured them through the process and assisted them by participating in family counseling and aftercare services. Clemens and Miller (2001) asserted that families who were able to assist the program in addressing their youths’ emotional, intellectual, and social needs encountered juvenile recidivism less frequently.

Attachments to school were also considered major elements that increased their competency development and self-esteem. The majority of the participants indicated that they had very little interest in school before entering their residential programs. Several of the participants stated that their programs had well-structured schools, and that their involvement helped them overcome negative perceptions about structured learning. This was also a major factor that accounted for their personal success. According to Acoca (2000), school-related characteristics are linked to delinquency. Poor educational performance leads to lack of skills, decreased potential for legitimate work, and difficult social opportunities (Clemens & Miller, 2001). Involvement is characterized as one of Hirschi’s (2002) elements that promoted socialization and conformity. Juvenile offenders who spent time engaging in conventional activities (e.g., school) were more likely to be rehabilitated and less likely to re-

offend.

### *Change in Perspective*

All of the participants expressed a desire for change to take place within the juvenile justice system. They did not blame the system for their past transgressions but did specify that unfair treatment and negative perceptions by staff (e.g., correctional officers and directors) demanded a closer examination. The majority of the participants advocated for tough love in some occasions. A deep philosophical, even spiritual, perspective may have assisted them in their overall competency development. This viewpoint aligned with Sermabeikian's (1994) spiritual perspective: "To understand the spiritual perspective, we must be willing to reverse our usual way of thinking and looking which is linear and externally focused" (p. 179). This statement subsumes a systems thinking (Senge, 1990) stance where compassionate, caring, and competent workers perceive juvenile offenders not as inmates who are being punished for committing crimes but as young people who are made accountable for their past mistakes and provided competency within holistic environments.

Redfield (1997) expressed this as living the new interpersonal ethic. Through deepening of positive dialogues, the frequency of synchronicity begins to increase. Patterns of positive thinking are prevalent, and change becomes eminent. Through shifting their perceptions of young offenders within the juvenile justice system, correctional leaders may begin to establish holistic environments in all of their juvenile residential programs as well.

Question Two: How do successful graduates of juvenile residential programs regard the successes and failures of themselves and young people in treatment programs?

Participants accounted for their successes and failures while on commitment and post-commitment status. They also made recommendations to young offenders in treatment

awaiting transitions back into their home environments.

### *Successes*

The majority of participants indicated times when they encountered many struggles while in treatment. Negative peer associations, problems with staff, and self-imposed limitations were several situations that participants confronted. Most of the participants learned how to cope within these trying environments. They relinquished the pseudo tough image and appreciated the tough love approach that programs administer to people.

Several participants within the level 8 (high-risk) and level 10 (maximum-risk) programs experienced extremely complex situations that tested their inner-strength and mental toughness. The objectives of their programs were to provide hands-on experiences that simulated real-life situations. These situations corresponded to Bond (2001) *Operation Outreach Program* that was designed to provide juvenile offenders with an opportunity to live and experience prison life. Through these experiences, young offenders would understand that they were accountable for their delinquent actions, and that these “shock treatments” would prevent further delinquent activity.

### *A Holistic Framework*

The residential programs that contributed favorably to the participants’ growth had elements of holism. They were composed of skillful counselors who understood the needs of the offenders. Effective counselors bonded with their clients and gained their respect and trust. They were able to provide therapy (e.g., anger management and mental health overlay services) with promising results. Counseling services were beneficial because counselors interacted with the offenders in integrative ways that made them feel comfortable.

These holistic program environments were similar to systemic and collaborative

environments described by Miller (1997). The keys to such programs were that they treated youth problems by creating positive environmental contexts that reinforced positive behaviors. They embraced a systems thinking perspective that concentrated on principles of the organization and looked at systems holistically. Schriver (2001) contended that systems approaches provide holistic perspectives on organizational environments. This process permitted a continuous flow of knowledge that benefited the counselors and the offenders. Haines and Drakeford (1998) called this a “Children First Philosophy”- a proactive stance where young people are supported by diagnosing them from their lived experiences then advocating for appropriate social and welfare services.

Other methods by which participants accounted for their successes were that they learned from their mistakes, they developed inner wills to succeed, and they established for themselves career-oriented future goals.

### *Failures*

Participants shared a variety of perceptions regarding reasons why young people fail while in treatment and post treatment. The issue of trust warrants discussion. Participants indicated that too many young people fail to use discernment when it comes to trusting peers within and outside of their program environments. These individuals are easily influenced by negative peer pressure and oftentimes find themselves back into trouble. This perspective is linked to the Subculture Theory of Delinquency and Social Learning Theory (Whitehead & Lab, 1996). It implied that youth who were involved with antisocial peer relationships were more likely to engage in negative group behavior.

The juveniles’ home environments were considered major contributors to potential failure as well. Young offenders, upon successful discharge from their programs, returned to

similar conditions that had existed before they began treatment. Many youths were from environments that consisted of dilapidated housing structures, drugs, and impoverished conditions. These environmental conditions negatively increased the potential for re-offending.

Neighborhoods greatly influenced youth behavior, attitudes, values, and opportunities (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993). This concept is aligned with Sutherland and Cressey's (1970) Differential Association Theory that stressed that criminal behavior is learned and not predetermined. This theory held that delinquent behaviors are learned from specific situational events from the environment. In association with these environmental factors is the social class. An Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) longitudinal study of 1000 at-risk youth discovered that social class had implications for delinquency. Lack of social capital in poor communities contributed to delinquency (Rose & Clear, 1998).

#### *Additional/Differential Sources*

Current literature focuses on juvenile delinquency and recidivism by investigating the juveniles' family dynamics, peer associations, communities, and academic backgrounds. Literature on the factors affecting juvenile delinquency fails to examine inductively the psychological issues (e.g., inner wills or desires for positive life outcomes) that drive or restrain the juveniles. The participants shared a variety of perspectives on this issue. They indicated that their successes and failures were inner-driven and articulated that desires for change came from within. Literature on this subject matter is expressed in spiritual terms (e.g., see Redfield, 1997); however, juvenile justice research is concerned more with measurable data that deductively addresses delinquency and recidivism in explanatory terms.

*“Sincere”* (participant number six) expressed a need for juvenile justice administration to incorporate peers as part of the treatment teams for socialization purposes (i.e., in an effort to get the offenders to open up). Literature on this issue centers on counselors or therapists attaining and administering the tools to transform these offenders. Youth involvement at the preliminary stages may allow them to be at ease and participate in more meaningful and holistic group discussions that may assist them in their competency development and transformations.

One important recommendation to correctional leadership is to hire compassionate, competent, people. Literature focuses primarily on the needs of the offenders and rarely on the people who are managing and providing therapeutic services. The participants shared variant perceptions regarding counselors and program staff within juvenile justice programs. One issue that the majority of participants felt strongly about was the manner at which staff members monitored and provided them with therapy. Some counselors were held in high regards, but others were described as ineffective and had difficulty discerning the use of “tough love” and compassion. More literature on this issue is recommended. Studies like this present one that assess program variables related to program staff and their skills would provide more detailed explanations on effective and ineffective treatment measures.

#### Recurring Themes

Six overarching themes emerged from participants’ responses. The first theme “Varying Perspectives within Juvenile Residential Programs” included discussions of the impact of counselors, the negative and positive aspects of programs, peer relationships, and self-imposed limitations. While discussing the concept of “Overcoming Patterns of Delinquent Behaviors,” participants talked about programmatic impact, an inner desire for

positive life outcomes, direct-file (tried as an adult) as shock treatments, and supportive family relationships. When participants discussed the “Challenge of Remaining Focused and Goal-Oriented,” they reflected on past transgressions, talked of taking a proactive stance, and spoke about philosophical perspectives.

Participants offered “Suggestions for Young Offenders.” These included relinquishing a tough image, refraining from negative peer influences, and applying learned objectives. Another theme that emerged was “Recommendations for ‘Change’ to Juvenile Correctional Leaders.” Participants recommended hiring compassionate, competent people and considering the special needs of offenders. Participants also discussed their “Accounts of Why Some Succeed and Why Others Fail After Treatment,” talking of inner will or lack thereof and the impact of programs.

All participants shared words of wisdom for young offenders who are currently residing in treatment programs awaiting their reentries into mainstream society. Participants believed that society has often given young offenders negative stigmas. These negative thought-forms lead to negative perceptions, judgment, and cycles of lower energetic frequencies that have counter effects on juvenile rehabilitation. Participants advised people from all socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities to have faith in these young people that they will change and make positive choices. “*Happy*” advised people to be more open-minded. Five participants asserted further that society has a greater role in this entire juvenile delinquency and recidivism debate, and that having a positive mindset about their abilities for “change” makes transition experiences more favorable. One participant, “*Mike*,” summed up these aforementioned perspectives especially well: “There is a lot of goodness in us, but some of us are just lost. Maybe part of our journey is to venture through the system to



find the good that lies within.”

### Implications/Conclusions

Findings of this study indicated some similar and some unique program experiences that impacted participants. The following assumption was reported by participants: young offenders who have supportive familial relationships, who function as productive citizens within their communities, and who make satisfactory performance in school, may experience recidivism less frequently than those who exhibit opposite characteristics.

Findings also suggested that poverty, peer relations, school, family life, self-imposed limitations, and community dynamics were linked to juvenile offending. In order to address the magnitude of this problem, there must be combined efforts on the behalf of juvenile correctional leaders, parents, and communities to exercise maximum efforts toward youth competency development. Although many participants shared positive aspects of their programs’ efforts to address the competency development issue, other participants were not satisfied with the educational and counseling aspects of the programs. They cited counselors who were ill-prepared and lacked compassion and sensitivity, indicating these drawbacks contributed negatively to their attempts to gain greater competency. Therefore, counselors and program staff need to be mindful of the vital roles they have in reducing juvenile recidivism. Competent counselors and teachers can have sustaining impacts on young people.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Demographic and Delinquent History

Age	Race	First Arrest	Subsequent Arrests	Types of Arrests	Commitment Levels	Siblings
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John (22)	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree Felony	3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree Felonies	Drug Possession Assault/Battery	Levels 4 Level 6	One brother and three sisters
Bob (22)	White	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree 2 <sup>nd</sup> Degree Felonies	Vandalism Burglary Robbery	Level 6	One step brother and one step sister
Tom (19)	White	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	Misdemeanors 3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree 2 <sup>nd</sup> Degree Felonies	Petty Theft Vandalism Drug usage Robbery Burglary	Level 6	One younger brother; one step brother and one step sister (both older)
Jeff (22)	White	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	Misdemeanors Felonies (3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree)	Marijuana Usage Underage drinking Burglaries	Level 6	One younger brother
Mike (21)	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	All Felonies	Aggravated Battery Assault on an Officer Escape Charge	Level 6 Level 8	Two younger sisters and one older brother
Sincere (21)	Hispanic	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	Felony	Petty Theft Armed Robbery	Level 10	One older sister
Sam (18)	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	Two Felonies	Criminal Mischief Burglary Grand Theft Auto	Level 6	Four sisters and two brothers
Happy (18)	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree Misdemeanor	Misdemeanor Three Felonies	Petty Theft Marijuana Possession Burglary Larceny	Level 6 Level 8	One brother and three sisters
Jim (20)	White	3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree Felony	Felonies	Burglary Robbery Drug Possession	Level 6	One sister

Appendix B  
Interview

1. What stories can you share regarding your experiences in a residential treatment program?
2. How were you able to overcome the repeating pattern of further delinquency?
3. How are you able to remain focused and goal-oriented given your past juvenile delinquent record?
4. Given your experiences in a residential treatment program, what experiences can you share that could assist young offenders in making a positive transition from a residential program to mainstream society?
5. Given your experiences in the juvenile justice system, what changes would you recommend to correctional leadership?
6. From your recent residential experience, what can you share regarding the educational component (e.g., school and counseling services) within your program?
7. Reflecting on your past experiences in and out of residential treatment programs, how can you account for why some succeed (including yourself) and why others fail?